

we remain that most hopeful of creatures by twoheadedcalf

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Coming of Age, Depression, Dissociation, Growing Up, I guess????, Multi, Will Byers centric, and the joyce-chief, idk what else????, so is the max-lucas, the stoncy is very much in the background, the will/mike/el is the endgame but i barely know how i'll get there adskjdfhs

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Will Byers & Eleven, Will Byers & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Will Byers/Eleven/Mike Wheeler

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-11-23

Updated: 2018-01-08

Packaged: 2022-04-03 15:16:23

Rating: General Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 4

Words: 7,870

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

After, Will wears an infinity of layers no matter where he goes, how warm it is or how warm it's going to be. He never wants to feel cold like that, or really any semblance of it, again.

Or, Will (and everyone else) lives life after the Shadow Monster. And then they grow up.

1. everything looks like a mess if you stand very, very close to it

Author's Note:

hi!! so, this is very much a coming of age story and there isn't a lot more plot besides: Growing Up. like, i'm thinking about something actually, y'know, supernatural. Strange (ha!). either way, that's all folks.

After, Will wears an infinity of layers no matter where he goes, how warm it is or how warm it's going to be. He never wants to feel cold like that, or really any semblance of it, again.

It wasn't that much of a sustainable habit. Makes any overexertion impossible and makes him sweat enough to cause some kind of dehydration.

Winter is nearing though, and however much that thought brings him dread, it also means he'll be able to keep this madness running for a while longer.

Way back when, before all of... Before. Before, Will used to be cold all the time. Not in the sense that he felt cold but that he felt cold to the touch, a product of bad circulation, which was probably a product of not enough nutrition. It didn't bother Will at all at the time; it mostly bothered others. When he and Will huddled close under the covers at certain nights, Jonathan would always make sure to keep his legs away from Will's cold feet. Mike, too, would only let Will hold his hand after warming them up.

It didn't bother Will, way back when, but now it feels like a premonition of sorts, like a warning he didn't heed. He doesn't know how he could have, though.

Going back home feels like going into an alien world. Which, Will guesses, in a way, it is. The drawings scattered and glued around the house show Hawkins but from the perspective of a parasite, an

infiltrator. From the perspective of an alien, not a kid who spent years biking all around town.

It takes all of the Byers' willpower not to go down hard right at the living room, with the drawings, the broken glass and all. First, they take care of Will's wound. Logically, Will knows that it should hurt. It's a burn and it should hurt. It's getting desensitized and it should hurt. It's getting ointment and it should hurt. But he just feels so far removed from everything that it just doesn't. He's numb and trying to care enough to make it hurt feels like a stupid and counter-intuitive move so he doesn't. Will just lets it be.

The three of them drop dead in Joyce's bed instead. This is something they haven't done since Lonnie first skipped town, so a while, then. Lonnie's abandonment seems far more insignificant compared to everything he's been through in the last year. So much so that Will wonders, for a moment, if he'll ever think about it again. He's thinking about it right now though, so there's the answer to that.

Will goes to sleep with his brother at one side, his mother on the other, surrounded by familiarity and he crashes for three whole days.

He wakes up to too much noise, even though there's no noise at all. The Byers house is far off enough from others and close enough to the woods that most of the sound surrounding it comes from nature. And yet, Will wakes up to white noise and harsh sound, like a cacophony of untuned instruments, the sound of an orchestra lacking a maestro. It's the sound of panic bubbling up inside him. He closes his eyes tight, puts his hand over his ears: *Shut it off! Shut it off! Shut it off!* And suddenly, opening his eyes wide with a gasp, it's off, whatever it was. His own mind, maybe.

He's alone in the room and the only sound is a bit of wind rattling the windows and hushed sound coming from afar, maybe the kitchen. It feels calm. He feels calm. It's a nice feeling and Will's pretty sure he hasn't felt it in a while.

First, he goes to the bathroom. Gets rid of the hospital scrubs, throws them into the trash can. They make him feel simultaneously too clean and too dirty. He swears he can *see smell feel* blood on them so, yeah. He gets rid of them. Next, he debates over taking a shower. It feels

wrong, like something he can and ought to be caught at. Like all those time you hear people talking about how you shouldn't let old people take showers behind locked doors because they might slip and fall and *die*. But it also feels like a luxury, and one he deserves, at that, so he takes the shower anyway. It's well deserved. Besides, the door's not locked.

Then, he goes to his room and puts on way too many layers, enough to make anyone swelter. And it does make him sweat, a bit, which in turn just makes Will glad. It feels organic, human. He's glad.

The way to the kitchen is quiet. The kitchen is quiet. The house is quiet. Not in a dreaded kind of way but not in a good way either. Will tries to ignore it. The drawings are gone and the house is kind of bare naked without them. He still prefers it that way. They are still missing a window which makes the wind rush in and suddenly putting on too many layers seems like a sensible thing to do and not just a trauma response. There's still a window missing but the shards of broken glass have been swept away. Tiny steps, he guesses.

Jonathan is in the kitchen and he's reading...something. It's not that Will didn't care, it's just that he's not interested. He's way more interested in the way that the freezer is squeaky clean and with its door wide open but he decides not to ask. He scrapes the chair and sits down.

"Hey, Will." Jonathan's voice is soft when he says it but it almost always is so Will doesn't mind. "Here, have some eggs." He pushes a plate with eggs and a single toast closer to Will. "Mom's outside. How did you sleep?"

I don't know, he wants to say but he knows it's not a good answer. "Like a rock." He says instead, with a slight smile.

The breath that leaves Jonathan's nose sounds enough like a chuckle for Will to relax.

He eats enough of the eggs to make himself feel full and then a little bit more just to make sure. By the time he's done, there still are eggs on the plate but he can't take it anymore. Better to not make himself sick first thing in the morning.

He lingers for a few moments, isn't sure of what to do. Then he scrapes the chair and goes outside. It's cold and he's barefoot. But Joyce is right on the steps that lead into the house, smoking, so Will doesn't have to go that far.

Joyce smokes all the time and at all times. She smokes when she's anxious, she smokes when she's happy; everything is a reason for a smoke. Or better yet, a reason is not necessary. Once, a few years ago, during the winter, when all three of them had to go to the city for some reason or another, she smoked three full cigarettes with the windows rolled up. They couldn't roll them down or else the snow would get inside the car. Will's eyes kept on watering the whole day. Last year, on his birthday, while everyone was singing he was sure that she wanted to light up a cigarette with one of the cake's candles. She didn't, of course, because she's not improper, but still.

Joyce raised her head when the door opened and smiled. "Hey, honey." Will couldn't see the pack of cigarettes but he knew that they were somewhere.

"Hi, mom." He dropped down to sit and instantly attached himself to her side, arms around her middle, grip soft but strong.

One hand came up to smooth down his bed hair, full of affection. He could hear her soft breaths and he knew she was taking a drag.

"I love you, mom." He was too afraid to look up and maybe see purple or maybe reddish marks around her throat but what he said was as sincere as ever.

Joyce rested her head against Will's in such a way that her breath, filled up with smoke, went right up his nose, but Will didn't mind. "I love you too, honey."

Going to the Snow Ball felt stupid. He had never gone to a school dance before, not because he was super adverse to it, like Mike, but really because there wasn't any reason to. And Will gets it, okay? He gets why this one is important: it's their last year of middle school and this ball feels like the resolution of this whole debacle. Or at least, this year's debacle.

So he goes. All his friends are going and they are all excited, in some way or another, and Joyce even disencumbers a suit from somewhere so not going feels like some kind of betrayal and Will's tired of being a traitor to everyone around him. So he goes.

But it feels stupid, like trying to stave something off. Like trying to stave off the realization that things just won't go back to normal, to the way things were before. It'd be weird if they did, considering that he's not the same. None of them really are.

He thinks of complaining about Mom just hanging around the parking lot, smoking, waiting for the inevitable time when he'll want to go away before everyone else but it'd be like stepping on something fresh, like stomping on a blossoming flower, so he doesn't. Will's not senseless.

So he walks in and he feels awkward in his suit, feels awkward among all the decorations, feels awkward among his teachers, feels awkward among his peers. Which is to be expected. The presence of his friends does appease the feeling but it still is a nerve-racking affair but then, most things are these days.

El coming feels like the cherry on top of a happy ending cake and Will does feel happy. He's happy for Mike, he's happy for El, he's happy for all of them. Despite she and Mike being almost glued to each other, Will does manage to spend time alone with El. It's mostly spent in a loaded silence, not a bad one, and with their hands linked. They are both on the edge of tears the whole time.

Back that night, when they briefly met, finally, when he was actually conscious, the meeting was spent hugging, forehead touching, breathing the same air, muttering each others' names. It seems that this is the only way they know how to communicate, silently, or almost so. They don't know each other but they do.

Being asked to dance by this random girl, being called Zombie Boy by this random girl: Will panics. He blabbers, looks for a way out. Mike doesn't offer one. Nothing does. Will panics, blusters, and then he just doesn't. He feels like he's just stepped to the side of his body, dancing this slow ballad, with this girl he doesn't know in any way, shape or form, doesn't want to know and doesn't want to be close to.

It just feels like insects crawling under his skin, dancing around like this. It goes on for a while: in this state of apartness, he's got no sense of time.

And then, like he's suddenly being slammed into his body, he parts himself from the girl, no explanations. He feels jittery, like a spooked animal. He takes his coat, rushed, waves away, not caring if his friends have noticed and gets out.

Joyce and Hopper are standing close, just barely touching; they haven't seen each other since Hopper fixed their window. The look on Joyce's face indicates that Will has lasted longer than she thought he would. Will just gets in the car, slams the door and puts his head between his legs. Breathes.

She knocks on the window, says, loudly, "is everything okay?". When Will looks up, his under eyes are wet. He mouths "too much" and goes back to his breathing. They hang around, just long enough for Joyce to finish her cigarette. And they go.

It feels like a band of horses stomping down on a good night.

2. dust, a scent fo sunshine

Summary for the Chapter:

(Mike, he thinks, is kind of haunted by the 353 days he spent calling for El only to receive no answer. Every time he felt some kind of presence, a pull, only to have his voice, his thoughts, echoed back at him. And the whole time, she was right there, and within reach.

Mike is angry, and rightfully so.)

Notes for the Chapter:

hi!!! so this chapter doesn't really go for the same vein as the last one and i don't really think any chapters will be like one another, if that makes sense? like, they will feature the same elements and the same bases (well, not the same, but the ones that were presented) but they'll all be really different, considering how these are different situations and different points in time. as the story progresses, some will be more aggravated then others.

as said, this chapter ends on a lighter note, i think, and it's also slightly shorter. hope you still enjoy it though!

Mike has been going crazy about seeing El. Which is to be expected, considering. Will thinks it has something to do with New Years; he wants to leave all of the bad stuff behind (or at least some of it) and Will can relate to that. It's what he's been trying (and ultimately, failing, as it seems) to do.

Mike doesn't go about it the best way, though. Importuning Hopper, Will thinks, won't be what gets the Chief to finally slack a bit and let them see El. Mike remains undeterred, from following Hopper around town to leaving him passive-aggressive messages (some outright aggressive) on the man's answering machine (how he even got

Hopper's phone number is a mystery). It doubles as a vengeance plot for him, Will assumes, from hearing Mike's angry mutters anytime Hop is even mentioned in conversation.

(Mike, he thinks, is kind of haunted by the 353 days he spent calling for El only to receive no answer. Every time he felt some kind of presence, a pull, only to have his voice, his thoughts, echoed back at him. And the whole time, she was right there, and within reach.

Mike is angry, and rightfully so.)

That's not to say that the rest of the party don't have their own methods either. Lucas does Hopper favors, the same kind of work he does around his neighborhood when he wants money to go to the arcade. Dustin tries to do the same, but it usually involves some sort of experimental science that makes things go badly. Even Max drops several hints about it, though she has nothing to offer to the Chief.

Will doesn't do anything. Will doesn't even speak to Hopper, except for when he sees him around town or when he's at the house, for some reason or another (Will *doesn't* ask). Will certainly does not talk about El to Hopper.

What he does do is, he mentions it to Joyce, over dinner, once, and then twice. Casual but obvious. Spaced out through a couple of weeks so that it doesn't feel forced. Will is no manipulator but that doesn't mean that he doesn't know how to kindly ask for things either.

So it's the end of February and it's decided that El is going to visit.

None of the party know where the cabin is (well, Will kind of does but his night there was spent in a haze of pain, terror, burning, being not himself but Himself so he couldn't give directions even if he wanted to) and Hopper wants to keep it that way. His house, which he hasn't lived in almost a year, is a mess and not nearly big enough to foster six kids for a night, so it only makes sense that the whole party conglomerates at the Byers house for it.

(There's a discussion, brief but poignant, about whether or not Max should come. Now, Mike doesn't have that much of a problem with Max nowadays; most of his self-righteous anger and bravado have

been redirected to Hopper and his parents, actually, so Will doesn't really get why he's putting up so much of a fight.

Lucas, well, it's obvious that Lucas wants her there. Besides liking-liking her, he's been the one to try and make her feel included since day one and he's not about to stop now.

Dustin, strangely and very unlike himself, remained silent through the whole thing.

"Besides, I'm pretty sure that El doesn't even like her and since all of this stuff is about seeing *her*-"

"Well, *I* didn't like *El* at first and look at where we are now."

"That's so not the same! Besides, it's different because you and El are part of the party and-"

"So is Max! How is it not the same?"

"She's n-"

Will feels oddly adverse to the petty dynamics at play in front of him. Sure, he has seen Mike and Lucas fight before, exactly like this, actually; it's not news. It's just something they do. It feels superficial to see them as bickering teenagers. Which is something, he realizes all of a sudden, kind of separated from the shock of the discovery, that they all are now. After all they went through, arguing like this feels like idiocy.

So does worrying about puberty, something he'd been doing before everything went down. Will turns fourteen next month. It doesn't feel important, for some reason.

"Max should be here." He says, over their voices, not loud but forceful enough to be heard. Will doesn't sound unlike himself, but like a different version of himself. It's odd.

There was a silence as everybody looked at him.

"Wasn't she the one who stopped the Billy guy and saved Steve from being beat to death? Didn't she help you guys burn the vines that

night? Wasn't she the one that drove you all there? Mike, you are the one that *told* me this! She helped with looking for D'art! How is she not-. She's definitely a party member. She should be here." A pause. "If you guys don't call her, I will. Actually, you know what, don't. I will call her."

Will went back to rearranging a few drawings and the other three started talking about what they should eat the day El came.

And there was that.)

It was late February and still cold and El was going to visit.

Mike was the first to arrive, which surprised exactly no one. He was a nervous ball of energy made into teenage boy, bouncing around the house. He'd alternate between following Joyce around the house and sitting down next to Will, blabbering. He'd probably be fluttering around Jonathan too, if he'd been at home and not at work.

Next comes Max, which...well. The atmosphere of excitement and expectation doesn't dwindle but it shifts a bit, like it wants to change. Max sits down on Will's other side at the couch and Mike hesitates before getting up and going back to following Joyce around.

It stays like that for a while. Will deliberates. Then he gets up, goes to the kitchen and says, "I'm going out back."

Things in the house go very, very still. Mike turns, looks at him sharply from his spot by the sink. Joyce turns more slowly.

"Will, honey, I don't think that's-"

"Mom, I'm going out back to Castle Byers. With Max. Nothing's gonna happen." *But if it does:* "I'm taking my walkie-talkie." Which doesn't do much but it, and electronics in general, feel like a lifeline nowadays. "Max's skateboard is very sharp." He offers as a consolation prize.

They stare at each other, cautious. Mike stares at both of them. Max stares at Will's back, glued to her seat on the couch. It's not a staring contest but definitely something akin to it.

Joyce gives.

“Okay, honey.” Will relaxes, resists the urge to roll his shoulders like he just left a boxing ring. He doesn’t like that image, that state of comparison, inside his head. “Don’t take too long.” It’s a warning, he knows, and he’s not about to ignore it.

He goes back to the living room, picks up the walkie-talkie and motions to Max with his head. She follows behind him, grip firm on the board. They go out the backdoor.

Will’s wearing 3 layers more than he should, probably, the sweat pooling under his armpits but it’s still winter and it’s still cold so he feels like it’s still within his right. Max deliberately steps on some snow and old leaves but the satisfying crunch she’s looking for doesn’t come.

Will’s footsteps stutter when he’s close to the shed but Max is a warm, solid presence and it makes him power through it without her even noticing. They move past it. The shed is behind him and it stays behind him.

Since he came back from the Upside Down, Will hasn’t been to Castle Byers. It seems, all at once, like a cursed space-time through dimensions and a beacon of hope. And he knows that’s possible, now, this kind of double entendre. And it made Will sad, really, because he, Joyce and Jonathan had spent a lot of time assembling it, trying to make it into something nice. He’s still trying to make it into something nice, even now.

Will goes in first, trying to block all of his periphery vision and take less of the space in, even though he knows it’s impossible. He sits down and holds the drape open for Max. She sits down, close. There’s a rustle of fabric as they settle and then,

“This is where I hid, back when-where I was in the Upside Down.” Because the Upside Down isn’t a place and it isn’t a time, either. Not for Will.

There was a silence, the kind Will had become familiar with lately. He could feel the blood rushing inside his head, like it was about to

burst out, but he forced himself to be calm.

Max's hand came to rest on Will's forearm and she said, firmly but not unkindly, "Will, you don't have to tell me."

"Yeah." He said and it sounded loud to him, in this wretched place. "Yeah but I want to. I want to *tell* you and I want you to *know*. Okay?"

Pause.

"Okay." And she didn't let go of his arm after that.

In the trek back to the house, Will regrets the fact that the distance isn't longer because the not-silence he and Max are sharing and the way they stumble into each other is nice enough that he doesn't want it to end. He still revels on the glorious feeling of being back home though, like he always does nowadays.

Lucas and Dustin are already there. The two of them and Mike are having a discussion, not deep into it but it's entertaining enough that Will and Max arriving doesn't pull their attention away from it. Or maybe they just pretend: that they didn't notice, that Will and Max hadn't been doing what they'd been doing, that Will and Max were there the whole time. In another occasion, it would've been awkward and stilted but the situation doesn't permit it and for that, Will is grateful.

When El finally gets to the house, it's mid to late afternoon and Hopper follows behind her, as a dark, gravelly shadow. It bursts all of them into motion, making them get up and clamor around El like moths to a flame, before the Chief can even close the door.

They are all talking at once, except El because she doesn't do that, it's not her thing, and that includes Hopper. Mike adamantly ignores everything he says and his mere presence. All the others just aren't paying attention. Eventually, Hopper gives up.

They trip back into the living room, all kinship and companionship and fall into their seats in this weird configuration, with Will and

Dustin on the floor, Lucas and Mike sprawled weirdly in the armchairs, and Max and El on the couch, like some kind of weird sun and moon.

And that's how the Byers household became the designated hangout spot for everyone.

Notes for the Chapter:

so, i want to comment on this because it's kind really important to me and i have no one to talk about it with, lol: my favorite line in this chapter is "joyce gives", even though it's really simple and kind of not at all to do with the main that's happening this chapter. as a reader, i'm always really floored when authors do the "you always take and take and take and i've got nothing left to give" dynamic so y'know, i was glad to do something like it. also important: it's not "joyce gives IN" or "gives UP", it's just "gives". maybe that'll come later idk. not with joyce tho.

on an unrelated note: i've been thinking of exploring, y'know, Strange(tm)/supernatural things in here, considering how it's been laid out on the show and it'd just be really interesting to develop. don't know how to go about it tho. suggestions?

ANYWHO, find me as girlfrightened @ tumblr.

3. maybe the flowers are blooming, [...] maybe this season of darkness will come to an end

Summary for the Chapter:

When he was little (*little-er*), younger, Will would roll around in the fresh cut grass of the Wheeler's or perhaps the Sinclair's lawn (because his yard just wasn't made for that kind of fun, with its sand and rough patches and dirt, dirt, dirt). He'd go back home itching all over but at least he'd go back home happy.

Notes for the Chapter:

i know u guys are like, waiting for the actual shipping/romantic stuff to happen and it will! it's just that a lot of bonding will come first. like, this will be an EXPANSIVE work. i have a timeline and everything and the only major plot point of 1985 is "entering high school" so that's why things are slow. but all of this is important though, especially for the future. besides, this IS will-centric so. ya know. anyway, hope y'all enjoy it!

Spring is a pretty thing in Hawkins, though not particularly special. The edges of the city become rounder and softer. Everything is greener and richer. It's a pleasant season, in a way that the other three just aren't.

When he was little (*little-er*), younger, Will would roll around in the fresh cut grass of the Wheeler's or perhaps the Sinclair's lawn (because his yard just wasn't made for that kind of fun, with its sand and rough patches and *dirt, dirt, dirt*). He'd go back home itching all over but at least he'd go back home happy.

At some point in life, he'd even taken to biking around town looking for the meadows, the sunflower fields, the dewiness and slowness he'd desired; at some point, Will had desired for life to just not move. But he couldn't do that now - it took a fight for him to even *be* alone

anywhere, *biking* alone anywhere was just out of the question. He'd tried to replicate, in paper and with crayons, the fields from his memories but they all ended up as swirls of green, yellow, beige and too much blank space. It made Will frustrated, so he stopped trying.

Spring in Hawkins takes a while to get its groove going, like the earth has to shake just a little bit more before the flowers are allowed to bloom. It takes a few weeks for the sunflowers to actually look at the Sun in Hawkins.

Spring is finally on track and Will's birthday is coming up just like it does every year. Will was aware of this since the turn of the year; aware that time was- passing. Which isn't a surprise in itself but it definitely feels like it. His birthday coming up doesn't make Will nervous, per say, but it does make him unsettled in some way. Because even though he knows things are changing, that *he* is changing, Will can't *see* it, can't *feel* it. Can't see past the end of this week, can barely feel himself aging.

Will has been avoiding mirrors as of late. Not because he dislikes his body that much, not any more than he always has, anyway. It's just that looking in the mirror means confronting the reality that his body doesn't feel like his anymore. It's not him, there, looking back. Impossibly, he feels simultaneously bigger and smaller than the body he inhabits now. That he has inhabited his whole life – it doesn't belong to him any longer.

So Will doesn't look at himself; hasn't in a while. Aging entails some sort of change, advancement, but he's ready to forget what he looks like so how do you record progress when there's no starting point?

But there's still a few things that he knows are true because the universe doesn't let him forget it:

1. He's shorter than all of his friends.

(From tallest to shortest: Mike, El, Lucas-and-Max tied at average-to-tall, Dustin and then Will, not only shorter but smaller than everyone else. Being surrounded by them felt both safe and threatening though he tried really hard to not make it like that.)

2. His growth has been stunted somewhere along the way.

(Dustin, though still on the shorter side, had been growing steadily. Lucas and Max, though stuck, hadn't hit their growth spurt phase yet. Mike was shooting up at an alarming rate, all awkward limbs and disgracefulness. El seemed slightly taller everytime they saw her. Will had stagnated and he *knew* it.)

Will's birthday crept up on everyone, in a sense: for Will, like a predator-monster, pawing slowly at him and then swallowing him whole; for everyone else, suddenly, like a scare. Usually, Joyce would plan something weeks prior, the wave of excitement taking over her as time passed. This year, she'd kind of forgotten. Well, not forgotten because that wasn't Joyce but now it was in the back of her mind while before it'd take up all of the space. (Jonathan, Will knew, had definitely forgotten, if the weird, embarrassed way he'd wrung his hands was anything to go by.)

The weekend before his birthday, Joyce actually asked what Will wanted to do, which he didn't recall her ever doing before.

Sleep, he thought immediately and wanted to say it, but didn't.

They were washing and drying plates. Jonathan wasn't home.

"I don't know." He said, non-committal. There was a silence because Joyce wanted an actual answer. "Can't we just, like, hang out?"

"Sure, sweetie, you obviously can call your friends over, I just meant to--"

"No, not them. Us. I meant us. You, Jonathan and I."

She didn't stop washing the dishes and he didn't stop drying them but Joyce gave him a look, like he was acting odd. Will was resolute on not looking back at her.

A beat.

"Did you guys fight?"

Will did not exhale loudly and annoyedly through his nose, because

that wasn't like him, but he certainly wanted to.

"No, Mom. Can't we just-. I will sleep in and then when you two get home, we'll just, I don't know, stuff ourselves with food, watch some movies and then afterwards we stuff ourselves some more with cake. Can't that be it? That's what I want. What I would like."

Sounded like a plan. Joyce said exactly that.

"Thanks, Mom." He said and kissed her cheek.

Will always had the habit of drawing the people in his life, that wasn't news. But they'd been something childish and innocent: Nancy always came out as an elvish princess, in a way or another; Joyce was a high priestess of some kind, holy, sacred and not detailed. That kind of thing.

Recently, his portraits had become something else; all reality, no spare space for fantasy. El was drawn exclusively in hot pink and sharp lines, even though it felt sort of too aggressive, considering how she'd been trying to soften the corners of herself. Mike was drawn soft and smudged, this loved thing in shades of purple, lilac and lavender. He never could get Joyce right: no color was the right color and no drawing captured her the way she was. He'd thrown away all his recent drawings of her, no matter how good others thought they were.

Max was burning red and he knew how cliché that was but it fit, somehow, so he didn't dispute the instinct. He'd done one of her laughing at something Dustin had said, sketchy, and she'd kept it, taped it to her locker.

(She had seen him drawing and he immediately offered it, both embarrassed and loving. He didn't think she would like it that much.

The one she'd *asked* for, though, was a self-portrait of himself done in gray and black, degrading and barely there, like a ghost. He gave it to her, hot with shame, wanting to get rid of it, and he'd let her *keep* it too, for some reason. That one he didn't know where it was.)

Will was leaning against the locker beside hers, staring at the burning red Max. They had history right now but real Max took a while to gather her things. He's broken out of his reverie:

"Hey, isn't your birthday coming up soon?" A smirk dances on the edge of her lips, twitches.

It's the day before Will's birthday, a Thursday. Somewhere, in a far off point in his mind, he knows this. But he's not exactly *aware* of it. He knows that he'll get to sleep in tomorrow and that's all the information his brain provides.

Will hums by way of response.

"We should do something."

"Sure."

"I'm serious." She says and shoves at his shoulder. She's smiling now, full on. "We should do something!"

A giggle escapes him. "Okay!"

"Okay." She says, and they go to class.

Getting Joyce to let him by himself at home had been a fight. Since Lonnie first left, the Byers don't yell, not at each other, at least. Without that kind of immediate emotional outlet, arguments are tense, filled with static, sparks. They aren't mean, not ever, but all three of them become this specific kind of strangled, desperate animal. Cornered. Deer in the headlights.

They've talked about it before but the whole issue comes to a head one night. Originally, Jonathan and Joyce were arguing about money. Will is, implicitly, not allowed to take part in these conversations. Jonathan thinks he can clear up his schedule enough to take another shift at work. Joyce isn't letting him. He can't take the normal shifts he's offered, for *some* reason. Neither of them says why but they don't need to, Will already knows: it'd mean leaving him with no company, no *protection*. He resents this, even though he gets it.

Will stops the arguments before Jonathan can suggest something ridiculous, like getting Steve to babysit him.

“Just take the shift. The one with normal hours.”

They stare at him. He stares back. If they didn't want his input, then they should've had this discussion where he couldn't hear. Jon and Joyce are sitting side by side at the dinner table. Will is situated on the end of it, legs pulled up and head resting on his knees.

“If we need the money then just take the shift.”

“Will, you know why he can't do that.”

“No, I don't. I really don't.”

“Yes, you do! Stop that!”

“Mom-”

“Will,” Jonathan's voice has taken a deep and sad tone. “The last time Mom and I took the same shift, it was- you got taken. I- we can't let that happen again. We should do everything to keep that from happening again.”

Something surges inside of him and he grasps it, out of sheer reflex. They don't *get* it. And he doesn't either, not really, but it happened to *him* and it's *still* happening to him, so.

“Yeah, and with you here it would've happened anyway! I would've gotten taken anyway! Or worse, we both would! What difference does it make? What difference does it make *now*, when it's gone? There's nothing to protect me from anymore! That's not the point!”

Whereas Jonathan's was a quiet admission, almost an confession, reverent and almost shameful but sincere, Will is an explosion; he doesn't yell but he gets up in a flurry, rests his hands on the table and feels the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.

Joyce matches him.

“We love you and we don't want anything to happen to you! When

we didn't pay enough attention, bad things happened. Don't you get that?"

"Exactly! It's already happened, Mom! It already happened and it passed and now we're all here." Will's throat burns when he speaks and his eyes glisten. "It's gone and the gate is closed and I have to live it now. I have to live like this."

"We *all* have to live with it now. We can't help but want to protect you now. Bad things are always happening to *you* and we're never there."

"But you aren't letting me live!" It comes out strained and loud, like a gunshot. Will's face wets. "I get it, okay? I get it! But it doesn't make a difference anymore. It was like this before and it didn't make a difference because the monster was *inside* of me and it's like this now and it doesn't make a difference because there's no monster. There's only me. All that's left is me. And I can't breathe. Nobody gives me room to breathe!"

They all deflate, like the room is a balloon that just burst. She comes around the table, hugs him tight and smothers. After a moment, Jon joins. He thinks of admonishing them about the tight curtain of flesh they've just created between him and the world but decides against it, chokes on his sobs instead. Decides against yelling *I can't breathe* at them, too.

So on Will's birthday he sleeps in and he doesn't wake up for breakfast and he doesn't wake up when Joyce enters his bedroom and kisses him goodbye and he's left alone in the house and he sleeps.

The house is as silent as can be. Will now has a habit of being as quiet and as minuscule as possible, disguising himself as non-threat, non-prey, *non-living*, and that translates into his sleep. He curls into himself, shoulders hunched, in a cocoon of blanket and clothes, hitched breath, not relaxed.

Nowadays, he only wakes up in two ways: slowly, in a haze he can't seem to get out of, like he's trapped in quicksand or suddenly, a bucket of ice cold water thrown on his face.

Will wakes up at noon, travels around the house, touches the walls, breathes in. He eats the plate of scrambled eggs Jon made him for breakfast. He goes back to bed and sleeps for another hour; he always wakes up exhausted these days.

He spends the afternoon sketching and watching the TV. Nothing good is playing.

He sketches a lot in pencil now, which he didn't used to do (he shouldn't waste school supplies like that) but crayons feel sticky against his skin and the color comes away when he scratches at it with his nails, so sometimes he just- doesn't use them.

Will doesn't eat lunch, forgets to. He has been doing that a lot lately, forgetting things.

Jonathan gets home at the end of the afternoon, when the sky is tinted orange and just beginning to darken. He messes up Will's hair, kisses the top of his head, puts the food at the kitchen then dumps himself on the couch.

Joyce arrives an hour later, when the sky is a soft black-blue that reminds Will of something. She has a bit of trouble getting through the door with a cake on her arms but eventually makes it through.

She hugs him close and tight, like she usually does. Kisses Jon's cheek.

Will's birthday is a private and quiet affair. They eat food that, thankfully, isn't cold yet while watching some movies. He falls asleep midway through the second one but wakes up half an hour later, in time for the end and two big pieces of cake that he hopes he can stomach.

They don't sing happy birthday and they don't light up any candles either but Jon still takes a few pictures because that's who he is.

The three of them huddle close to each other at the end of the night, drinking orange juice before going to bed. The sky is dark but here, at his home on the edge of town, he can see a lot of stars.

Notes for the Chapter:

can yall tell that i literally CANNOT write dialogue
lol

find me @girlfrightened on tumblr!!

4. there's nothing more intimate in life than simply being understood, and understanding someone else

Summary for the Chapter:

He's the second oldest of the whole group, believe it or not. Max turned fourteen on November. She and the boys (and that included Steve too, somehow) went out for milkshakes. Will couldn't go (because of course), still partway recovering, partway wishing he wouldn't. The next time he saw her though, he presented a bouquet of mismatched flowers (because of course he would).

Notes for the Chapter:

kind of a short chapter and i had a bit of trouble actually writing it (for some unknown reason because the pretense of it is super simple! @brain what u doing). hope you guys like it!

On Saturday night, the day after Will's birthday, it rains. Now, spring is a season filled with mostly with perfect days: days where the way the sun shines is pleasant, the blue of the sky is kind and the sky is filled with fluffy white clouds. Every now and then, though, there's a storm. Spring storms aren't the same as summer storms: torrential, sudden, quick-to-come and quick-to-go. Spring storms aren't the same as winter storms: lasting days, sharp and biting and *cold*. Spring storms can be predicted, they are *to be expected*. If they pay enough attention, anyone can see in the distance, the dark clouds rolling and anyone can feel the wind picking up, just a bit.

Will doesn't like storms. He doesn't like most things about storms: the thunder is not unlike his father's heavy (drunk, sometimes, *most times*) heavy foot falls or the way he'd laugh (at Will, at Jon, at Joyce *a lot*) and it'd echo around the house; the lightning doesn't scare him, not outright, but it makes him feel just like those animals that might go rabid at the flash of a camera; the rain, though, is the one thing he likes. He didn't used to, felt too much like a cleansing that he didn't

need, like his skin was too sensitive for it; now though, maybe the ravenous angry downpour of a storm can wash the wrong away (the water from the shower just doesn't do it, it never goes away, the things under his skin, no matter how hard he scrubs – maybe it never will).

The storm and the bundle of blankets and clothes (that might just keep away the monster!) are a heavy pressure against him and it makes for a feverish night. He feels trapped but is hesitant to set himself free; there's comfort in this – he's afraid, always, of the empty space left behind. He can't sleep but can't wake up either, rolls and rolls and rolls around in bed.

On Sunday, he wakes up too late for breakfast. He gets up, blankets following across the floor and goes to the window. It's cold, chilly. *Refreshing*. He touches the glass and his skin prickles; he's hot, *warm*, spent the night sweltering, his pajamas are still kind of humid. He trips out of the room to the bathroom, and then heaves his body to the kitchen.

Sundays are slow days in Hawkins. The town isn't particularly religious (except in the way that every small town actually really is) but it is lazy, in the way that everyone will take the opportunity to do nothing all day. What that means is that Joyce gets on later and gets off earlier and Jon doesn't work at all. They can allow themselves to relax, just this once.

Will wolfs down *some* food, almost arfs at it at some point, his stomach not prepared for it. He bears it, swallows, if only for Joyce's peace of mind. His body is slow at processing can't quite work itself up to it (he tries not to think about whether that's a consequence of being There or not; he can't take the answer, not sure which option is worse) so he's sitting on the couch, dazed after lunch when there's rasps against the front door, many of them. And the party comes in.

Everyone is wearing their day-to-day clothes, except Lucas, still wearing his Sunday's best, looking like he came straight from church. Will is still in his pajamas. He's kind of embarrassed about it.

The boys pile in, shuffling their feet like a dog that's been caught doing something wrong. They hug him, one by one, and it takes Will

a while to realize that what they're murmuring are happy birthday wishes. They *sound* ashamed because they *are*; they'd forgot his birthday.

(Which is fine by Will. It was kind of the whole point – he thought they'd realize that.)

Max is last on the line. She doesn't hug him. She looks...upset. *Angry*. She says, hushed like a secret, voice firm, "You know, if you didn't want to do anything, you could have just said so. You didn't have to lie."

Even though "friends don't lie" is the party's main slogan, Will doesn't take offense like a statement so it's okay. He doesn't know how to kindly say *I didn't want this* or *I didn't want you here*, doesn't know how to say *It's nothing against you* without sounding like an asshole, so he doesn't. He settles for something else, not wholly untrue.

"I didn't lie. I just...forgot, too." *Forgot you'd want to be here, forgot you cared.*

For a moment, he's not sure she understands or that maybe this answer is worse than the other. Then, she hugs him, arms around his shoulders, bumping her chin against his cheekbone and she says, "Happy birthday, Will."

He's the second oldest of the whole group, believe it or not. Max turned fourteen on November. She and the boys (and that included Steve too, somehow) went out for milkshakes. Will couldn't go (because of course), still partway recovering, partway wishing he wouldn't. The next time he saw her though, he presented a bouquet of mismatched flowers (because *of course* he would).

She scoffed. *Do I look like I like flowers, William?*, she'd said. She kept them though, at least for a while.

They sat on the living room, prim and proper. Awkward.

Mike brought him a pack of colored pencils, new and shiny.

Max brought him a book, old, tattered, used, *loved*. Said it reminded

her of him. (Will didn't know what to do with the fact that Max liked books enough to pick one *specifically* for him so he set it aside instead.)

Lucas brought him a Leia action figure to match the Luke one Will already had. (They used to have Star Wars marathons every year, just him and Lucas, because Mike got way too invested and Dustin got distracted too easily. In the rush of things, they haven't had one, not for the last two years. Some things just fade away, Will guesses.)

Dustin gives him *another* X-Men comic. Will can't tell if he's trying to say something or not. He can't even *begin* to understand what that would be.

It's late afternoon, they've eaten an infinite amount of crackers and drunk some iced tea (Max made a face at it), when Will asks, "Hopper didn't let El come?"

Everything stops and everyone sits in silence, like the air has stopped circulating the room.

Oh.

"Oh." He says.

Mike's shoulders hunch and suddenly he's back to the state he was in when he first walked into the house. He shuts his mouth hard and Will hears his teeth click and his body shudder.

Will gets up and throws over his shoulder: "It's okay." Goes to his room and comes back with the Supercomm, sitting back down.

He tunes in to El's channel easily and her voice rings out crystal clear, no static, even though the cabin isn't close at all, "Will?"

"Hey, El." He says and then the others echo it, scattered.

"Why is everyone at your house?" *And I'm not?*, she doesn't say but Mike must hear it because Will swears he hears his bones rattle.

"Will's birthday was on Friday so we came, uhm, today," It hangs awkwardly for a second. "To give him well-wishes."

“Birthday?”

“Yeah. It’s the day you’re born.”

“People normally get together for it and like, celebrate another year of life.”

“Oh, okay.” She says and they move on.

Will is in bed already, under the blanket, wearing his long-sleeved pajamas, hoping he doesn’t get too hot in the middle of the night, only somewhat comfortable, when he realizes he doesn’t know when is El’s birthday (just like he doesn’t know most things about her). He chokes on something and immediately reaches for the walkie-talkie.

She responds and he hears hollowed-out, empty voices in the background (must be the soap operas). “Hey, Will.”

“Hey, El.”

They stay silent for a while. Will is thinking. He thinks for so long that when he finally speaks, he’s afraid she’ll no longer be paying attention.

Will says, “When’s your birthday?”

The answer comes quick: “I don’t know. Does everyone have one?”

“Yeah, El.” Will is sick with the thought that this is another one of the things that she’s been kept from. “When were you born?”

“I don’t know.” She says, absent.

The corner of Will’s eyes prickle but he ignores it. He tries not to think of that time in the Upside Down but does anyway; it’s less scary if he’s thinking about her and not the monster. He thinks of the first time they actually met: the mess of curls, mess of clothes, the tight-lipped sincere smile. He thinks, *I don’t want anything good to ever be kept from you.*

“Can I give you one?”

“A birthday?”

“Yeah. I’ll pick a day and that’ll be your birthday.”

“Okay.”

He squints at the calendar on his on his wall but he can’t see that far, especially in the dark.

“July 12th.” *Summer child*, he thinks and smiles.

“Okay.”

Notes for the Chapter:

i only realized that el probaly DOES have a date of birth now that she's adopted and is officially a person in the eyes of the law after i'd already gotten the idea in my head so, y'know. what's done is done. besides, it's really cute! (i also couldn't find the d.o.b. anywhere?? so lol.)

anyway, i'm now @tofeast on tumblr and i also have a it/st blog now: @bipolartozier. find me there!!!

Author's Note:

let me know ur thoughts!! also, i'm girlfrightened @ tumblr, message me there too! i mean, if u want.